

Comparing the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science and Technical Subjects and the Standards of Alberta, Canada and New South Wales, Australia

Introduction

Through the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) Initiative, states and territories have collaborated in the development of a common core of standards in English language arts and mathematics for grades Kindergarten through twelve that are now being adopted by states. Designed not only for the purpose of providing strong, shared expectations, the Common Core State Standards will also allow adopting states to collectively create and share high-quality tools such as assessments, curricula, instructional materials (such as textbooks and software), and professional development programs.

As educators and policymakers review the CCSS for English Language Arts (ELA) & Literacy, they will want to consider the ways these new standards compare to, and build on, existing standards in ELA. This brief describes the comparison between the CCSS and the instructional expectations of two high-achieving educational systems: Alberta, Canada and New South Wales, Australia.¹

Common Core State Standards in for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science and Technical Subjects

The Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science and Technical Subjects are the culmination of a broad-based effort led by the states to create next-generation K–12 ELA standards aimed at ensuring that all students graduate from high school ready for college and careers. The K-12 CCSS are divided into four strands: Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening, and Language. In addition, at the middle and high school levels (grades 6-12), the CCSS also set requirements for literacy in history/social studies, science and technical subjects.

College and Career Readiness (CCR) standards anchor the CCSS and define general, cross-disciplinary literacy expectations that must be met for students to be prepared to enter college and careers ready to succeed. The K-12 grade-specific standards define end-of-year expectations and a progression designed to enable students to meet college- and career-ready expectations no later than the end of high school. The CCR and high school (grades 9–12) ELA standards work in tandem to define the college and career readiness bar—the former providing broad standards, the latter providing additional specificity.

ELA Standards in Alberta, Canada and New South Wales, Australia

Over the past year, Achieve has undertaken extensive international benchmarking efforts to ensure that the content of standards put forth in the common core initiative compare favorably with the standards from high-achieving nations. The students of both Alberta and New South Wales have performed at high levels on international assessments such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and The Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS). These two jurisdictions, both English-speaking, are known for their excellent and clearly-articulated standards.

¹ The documents reviewed were, for Alberta, *The Alberta English Language Arts (10-12) Curriculum Outcomes* (2003); *Alberta Program of Studies, ELA, K-5* (2000), and, for New South Wales, *English Stage 6 Syllabus, 2010*, and *English Stage 6 Prescriptions: Areas of Study Electives and Texts 2006-2008*; New South Wales English K6 Syllabus, 2007.

Alberta has identified standards for curriculum and assessment, as well as for student achievement. Thus, the Alberta standards are explicitly integrated with curriculum and instruction, and describe grade-by-grade standards, as do the CCSS.

The standards for **New South Wales** are also embedded in a program that connects curriculum and instruction with expectations for student outcomes. The Syllabi that describe the program for English language arts include objectives for student learning, descriptions of expected student outcomes, and detailed content standards for each objective. New South Wales provides a benchmark for the current Australian system, which is likely to change in 2011 with newly created national standards replacing individual state standards.

Achieve's Analysis

Achieve has analyzed the CCSS, the Alberta, Canada and the New South Wales, Australia standards to determine how they compare in terms of **rigor, coherence and focus**.

Rigor refers to the degree that sets of standards address key content that prepares students for success beyond high school. In ELA standards, the challenge is how to make clear the expected level of accomplishment in processes and products, and, thus, present a meaningful level of rigor in the standards. **Coherence** refers to whether the standards reflect a meaningful structure, revealing significant relationships among topics and suggest a logical progression of content and skills over the years. **Focus** refers to whether the standards suggest an appropriate balance in the concepts and skills that should be acquired by graduation from high school. Standards should be teachable and key ideas should be clear.

Standards that are rigorous, coherent and focused provide better guidance to educators, students and parents about desired learning outcomes than those that are not. Expert ELA content analysts conducted a side-by-side comparison of the three sets of standards, and this brief describes their findings.

Major Findings

- ✓ The Common Core State Standards in ELA are as rigorous as the Canadian and Australian standards in terms of the demands of the expectations in reading, writing and other forms of communication. At the broadest level, the CCSS and the standards of Alberta, Canada and New South Wales, Australia are well aligned in that all three documents expect students to read widely (both literary and informational texts), write (in both literary and informational genres), speak, listen, and view and produce multimedia presentations.
- ✓ All three sets of standards present a coherent structure for ELA, although the organizational patterns of each are different from each other. While both Alberta and the CCSS show a progression in demand by describing skills specific to each grade level, New South Wales organizes its expectations within six stages. While each set of standards is organized around different conceptions of ELA, all share a similar focus on the traditional elements of reading, writing, listening and speaking.
- ✓ Although the focus is similar among the three sets of standards, including a focus on reading, writing, speaking and listening, and valuing group teamwork, only the CCSS focus on the importance of middle and high school students reading and writing in the content areas of history/social studies, science and technical subjects.

Detailed Findings

Rigor

The rigor of the CCSS as compared to international benchmarks is a topic of considerable interest. Both Alberta and New South Wales have highly-regarded, rigorous ELA standards, both having placed in the top three for literacy in the 2006 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study for fourth graders (PIRLS) as well as in the 2006 Programme for International Student Achievement (PISA) for 15 year olds in reading.

Depth and Breadth of Reading Materials:

The CCSS, Alberta and New South Wales all expect that students will read both literary and informational texts widely. Students are expected to critically analyze the style, organization and elements of a variety of text types, including literary and factual texts. Although equally rigorous, the standards of both New South Wales and Alberta focus on narrative and expository forms in reading and writing more at the elementary levels than at the secondary level. The CCSS require the reading of complex informational texts as well as literature in English classes throughout the full K-12 spectrum.

Reading lists play a different but important role in the CCSS, Alberta and New South Wales standards. In all three, reading lists aim to ensure that students will be engaged through rigorous reading materials. For example, the New South Wales' syllabus focuses on course-specific requirements for high school English classes, and provides detail (including types of texts taught and forms of assessment) to an extent not present in the CCSS. Choice of texts in New South Wales is offered, but within parameters set by the state. Text selection in Alberta is like that of New South Wales, in offering choices within an approved set of materials. All public and separate school boards, charter schools, and private schools follow the Alberta Program of Studies and the curriculum approved by the provincial department of education.

Although not intended as a curriculum, the CCSS do offer exemplar texts that model the complexity, range and quality of texts appropriate for grades Kindergarten through grade 12. Five English texts, however, are required reading; high school juniors and seniors must study the Declaration of Independence, the Preamble to the Constitution, the Bill of Rights and Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address, as well as one of Shakespeare's plays.

An important similarity across required and recommended reading in the CCSS, New South Wales and Alberta is the focus on texts by predominately native authors. Each set of standards highlights its own nation's literature and culture. This attention to each nation's own literary tradition is evident in Alberta's demand that a minimum of *one third* of the texts studied in each senior high school English language arts course must be texts authored by Canadians, and almost all of the Australian states require a certain percentage of texts, typically 30 percent, be authored by Australians.

Range of Writing:

Both New South Wales and the CCSS expect students to produce a wide range of literary and factual texts (including imaginative, informational and argumentative/persuasive), paying attention to topic, audience, purpose and form. Alberta requires many of the same genres in writing – to inform, explain, persuade, entertain or inspire. All three sets of standards expect students to assess the accuracy, completeness, currency and relevance of information selected from sources, and to assess the appropriateness of the information for the purpose of writing. In addition, Alberta, New South Wales and the CCSS require students to compose sustained arguments supported by textual evidence.

Research:

New South Wales does not address research to the extent that both Alberta and the CCSS do. Alberta expects its students to refine the depth and breadth of inquiry or research; to identify the purpose, audience, and form of presentation; and to limit or expand the topic as necessary. In like manner, the CCSS require that students be able to "gather, comprehend, evaluate, synthesize, and report on information and ideas; to conduct original research in order to answer questions or solve problems; and to analyze and create a high volume and extensive range of print and non-print texts in media forms old and new."

Coherence and Focus

Achieve's analysis indicates that the CCSS and the Alberta and New South Wales standards share some similar traits in coherence and focus but also differ in important ways. In terms of similarities, all three documents include strands or sets of standards that focus on reading literary and informational texts, writing in specific genres, listening, speaking, and language skills. They also all emphasize a few key topics and develop connections among those topics at each grade level, which help to ensure a greater depth of learning.

Organization:

All three sets of standards present a coherent structure for ELA, although the organizational patterns of each are different from each other. The CCSS are organized into four strands – Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening, and Language – with a Reading Foundations section included at the elementary levels. These strands make the document easily accessible due to its familiar structure, which is like many current state ELA standards. The international standards, on the other hand, tend to be quite different from this traditional structure. Alberta, for instance, sets out their six language arts strands (listening, speaking, reading, writing, viewing and representing) at the K-9 grade levels as integrated into five general outcomes (explore thoughts, ideas, feelings and experiences; comprehend and respond personally and critically to oral, print and other media texts; manage ideas and information; enhance the clarity and artistry of communication; and respect, support and collaborate with others).

New South Wales does not even refer to grade levels in its expectations, but rather sets them out in six stages that cover Kindergarten through grade 12. The stages are organized somewhat like Alberta by objectives that integrate the language arts skills. These objectives refer to knowledge and understanding, skills, and valuing and appreciating. Thus international expectations tend to offer models of how language strands should be integrated through the content area. The CCSS present language skills in separate sections and clearly note that the integration of the skills is the goal. The CCSS include several reminders that the processes of communication are closely connected, as seen in those standards that apply to both speaking and writing and to both listening and reading. Even more integrated, however, are the media and research skills that are threaded throughout the CCSS, clearly conveying the message that such skills are not effective in a vacuum, but, rather, in service of many communication goals.

Reading and Writing Across Content Areas:

While both sets of expectations from New South Wales and Alberta focus on narrative and expository forms in reading and writing, the CCSS are much more explicit in referencing interdisciplinary literacy and the specific need for content-specific literacy skills than either of the other two documents. This focus may be due, in part, to timing; the stream of research on content-specific literacy has increased in recent years and the CCSS reflect this growing awareness. Neither the documents from Alberta nor those from New South Wales include any sections comparable to those in the CCSS that outline reading and writing expectations for history/social studies, science and technical subjects.

Although Alberta, like the CCSS, expects its history students to produce effective writing (its social studies diploma exam, for example, includes an essay that is worth 50 percent of a student's grade), the dominant genre in the English class is literature. A clear focus on literature as the center of secondary coursework is also evident in the New South Wales syllabi.

Speaking and Listening and Group Work:

The importance of being able to function productively within a group is highlighted in each of these standards. New South Wales includes working with others and in teams as one of the key competencies in its secondary curriculum, and interacting with others as one of the three main interrelated uses of language at the elementary levels. Alberta sets expectations beginning in Kindergarten that students are able to listen to the ideas of others. By high school, students must "set appropriate personal goals for participation in a group; respect, be open to, and be supportive of the thoughts, opinions and contributions of others in a group; and share personal knowledge, expertise and perspectives with others, as appropriate." Likewise, the CCSS regard collaboration as a necessary skill; an anchor standard for speaking focuses on participating effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively. As noted in the CCSS, "To build a foundation for college and career readiness, students must have ample opportunities to take part in a variety of rich, structured conversations—as part of a whole class, in small groups, and with a partner."

Differing Approaches to Teaching and Learning

As mentioned previously, the international benchmarks describe both standards and a curriculum while the CCSS present the standards upon which a curriculum can be built. Both Alberta and New South Wales describe a detailed curriculum for their schools, and thus include a large proportion of expectations that address teaching concerns, such as learning strategies. The CCSS maintain a focus on the products of learning, not the strategies, by design.

Processes and Metacognitive Skills:

International standards tend to focus on learning strategies where the focus is clearly on results more than means. The Alberta standards, for example, include a focus on reflection, personal response and metacognition that is not shared with the CCSS. One reason for this difference is that Alberta is describing a complete curriculum, not only a set of standards intended to guide the curriculum. Thus, the Alberta expectations for writing address features such as the expression of personal reactions and connections with texts, making personal connections with characters, expressing personal preferences for texts, comparing personal challenges with others' challenges, and considering what aspects of human nature students observe in both the texts they read and their communities. In addition, the Alberta expectations at the Senior High School level address topics and performances such as that students will "experiment with a variety of strategies" and "set personal goals for language growth." The CCSS tend to focus more closely on student performances and outcomes rather than strategies or processes for learning and reflection.

New South Wales sets expectations similar to Alberta in emphasizing values and attitudes, strategies, and metacognition to a degree not present in the CCSS. For example, New South Wales includes expectations that students will have positive attitudes, such as "enjoying" creating texts and "experiencing" texts and that they will "learn about the cleverness and joy of invention." Students are expected to "value and appreciate reflection on their own processes of learning." The CCSS purposely do not define how teachers should teach, nor do they define everything that should be taught.

Conclusion

A comparison of the CCSS with standards from Alberta and New South Wales reveals many more similarities than differences. While the specific language of grade-level expectations may differ, these documents are similar in rigor and share a similar organizing structure (by outcomes, by strand, by level) and a shared focus on student knowledge and skills in English language arts. All include expectations for reading (both literary and informational texts), writing (both literary and informational texts), speaking, listening, working collaboratively, and research. In a system based on the CCSS, one might see more emphasis on literacy skills across the disciplines, while in systems based on the Alberta and New South Wales expectations, one might see more emphasis on reflection, imagination, and personal response. Overall, however, the expectations are closely parallel across the CCSS and the Alberta and New South Wales standards.

All three sets of standards are rigorous, coherent and focused, and policymakers can be assured that in adopting the CCSS, they will be setting learning expectations for students that are similar to those set by the high-achieving nations of Canada and Australia.

Achieve is a bipartisan, nonprofit education reform organization that has worked with states, individually and through the 35-state American Diploma Project, for over a decade to ensure that state K-12 standards, graduation requirements, assessments and accountability systems are calibrated to graduate students from high school ready for college, careers and life. Achieve partnered with NGA and CCSSO on the Common Core State Standards Initiative and a number of its staff and consultants served on writing and review teams. For more information about Achieve, visit www.achieve.org